



2013

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But What Can You Do for Us? - Anna Simons

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Late last week the White House issued a [new policy on security sector assistance](#). According to the White House [press release](#), the aims of security sector assistance are to:

- 1) Help partner nations build the sustainable capacity to address common security challenges
- 2) Promote partner support for U.S. interests
- 3) Promote universal values, and
- 4) Strengthen collective security and multinational defense arrangements and organizations.

Let's leave aside for a moment the fact that "universal values" don't exist. The Administration's approach is questionable for more prosaic reasons. Take goal number 2: What kind of partners are going to sign up to look out for our interests when we don't even pay lip service to helping them with their security concerns?

I remember not long after 9/11, at the Naval Postgraduate School, where I teach, one of our African army officers decided to write his master's thesis on the cattle raiders plaguing the northwest corner of his country. Why? Because cross-border raids posed a major problem to his military. A couple of years later, one of his colleagues focused on water rights in Lake Victoria. Neither officer was worried about what most concerned Washington at the time: anti-Western Islamists. Instead, both officers tackled topics of pressing local concern. Had those in senior positions beyond the Naval Postgraduate School known about these choices, they probably would have considered them wastes of time and money.

They weren't, and they aren't. It beggars the imagination that we don't see more benefit in helping other militaries in areas where they know they need security assistance. Not only would this be our best shot for helping them improve their capabilities overall, but the better they can handle the threats that matter to them, the better they will be able to handle threats, period. So what that an automatic-weapon-wielding cattle raider somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa might never threaten us.

I see at least four flaws with Washington's current approach for security assistance. First, it is all about "us" and our needs, thereby ignoring or taking for granted others' needs. Second, it shows no understanding of what "partnering" really means. Third, it suggests we will be pursuing the same old strategies that have served us so poorly in the past (think of Mali). Finally, it diverts us from what should be our main goal: the development of incorruptible, apolitical security services—a goal that is an either/or proposition, and not something, as many Washington insiders contend, that takes decades to achieve.

Let me elaborate these points, taking the last one first.

When security services are incorruptible, states hang together. Look at India. No country these days has more sectarian divisions, not to mention multiple insurgencies. Yet India's armed forces remain apolitical and professional. Nor is this just a legacy of British imperialism; it is a lived reality, requiring real work and commitment to meritocratic principles. (To be fair the threats beyond India's borders, as well as within them, no doubt force this issue too.)

Now, imagine other countries in which most politicians aren't just corrupt but also manage to stay in power

through intimidation. How are they able to do so? The answer: Members of the security services are at *their* service, not the service of their country. Men in uniform, whether hailing from the army, the police, the gendarmerie, or a praetorian guard, act as the muscle. It's not hard to see that if members of the security services refused to behave like thugs, venal politicians would have a hard time mustering protection for their abuses of power. The significance of apolitical, incorruptible security services thus cannot be overstated. And although developing a professional force is a harder task than most in Washington seem to realize, it is also more straightforward.

It is harder in the sense that building such a force requires a leader who is nationalist enough to want to make this happen. Such individuals tend to be rare. Ramon Magsaysay, Minister of Defense and then President of the Philippines in the 1950s, was one such individual. Magsaysay helped turn the Filipino army around with assistance from a small team of Americans under Colonel Edward Lansdale. This effort required neither decades nor thousands of U.S. advisers.

Lansdale took pride in introducing the term "civic action" to the U.S. military. What he meant by this is that the Philippine military needed to prove to Filipinos that it existed to protect rather than to prey on them. As a concept, "civic action" has morphed over time, but it still provides the easiest proof there is of who has what it takes to be a worthwhile partner. Anytime we find ourselves having to cajole a leader into wanting to fulfill any semblance of a social contract, we should recognize the effort as a lost cause. (Today's most vivid exemplar: Hamid Karzai.)

Determining whether a leader has the potential to become more "legitimate" doesn't have to be complicated. In the wake of Afghanistan and Iraq, most U.S. policymakers (finally) agree that getting in bed with a government that shows no interest in its population makes no sense. Thus we should ask two litmus test questions before proffering assistance: Does the country we're considering as a partner already possess a civic action capability? If not, is it willing to develop one? Governments that don't want their militaries to develop a civic action capability are governments we can't help—nor should we want to.

In this sense, civic action represents the ideal canary in the coalmine. Even better, by returning to the idea that *they* do the heavy lifting (while we do the assisting), we would extricate our military from the business of digging wells, building schools, setting up clinics and performing all sorts of other aid-like functions. By making all such tasks the responsibilities of partner militaries (and their governments), we wouldn't just arrest the corruption we inevitably fuel whenever we send taxpayer-funded projects, money and stuff abroad; we would also force governments to have to remain responsive to their citizenries, thus yielding "partners" worthy of the name.

The U.S. military should consider only three types of partnerships viable:

In Partnership no. 1, you are my equal. We are interchangeable, and our forces can be fully integrated.

In Partnership no. 2, I trust you implicitly. We can agree on a division of labor. I'll be responsible for Sectors A, B, and C; you'll be responsible for Sectors D, E, and F.

In Partnership no. 3, we are complementary. You have skills and capabilities I lack, and vice versa. I'll defer to you for intelligence and local knowledge; you can rely on me for logistics and medevac.

Key to each of these different kinds of partnership is the notion of mutual indispensability. Anything less creates a dependency, and a dependency is by definition not a partnership.

How many countries today can we count on as genuine partners instead of expedient dependents? To how many governments have we made clear what partnership means? Alternatively, what does it take to get a country to full partnership status?

Not only should we be far more explicit about what we mean by “partner,” but it’s even more important to understand what the word partner might mean from our putative allies’ perspectives. Unfortunately thus far, no one seems to have given adequate thought to what the term “partner” *should* mean—whether to others, or to us. Small wonder we continue to flunk the Sun Tzu test of cross-cultural understanding, which should be proviso number one for partnering.

As if this enabling ignorance is not ironic enough, consider the fact that militaries are usually the most nationalist of a country’s institutions. Consequently, career professionals in all armies tend to have heightened sensibilities when it comes to their military’s (and even their country’s) capabilities. This represents one of the most underappreciated challenges for members of our military when they go abroad to work with foreign counterparts. Even in the best of times, it’s tricky to offer advice without causing offense. But that difficult task will grow even thornier should we proceed with what some in Washington advocate: sending abroad entire brigades’ worth of military advisers.

Sending abroad lots of trainers is one thing. With only a finite number of ways to fieldstrip a weapon or read a GPS, the U.S. military excels at training to a standard. But advising, mentoring, shaping and influencing is a craft, not a science. Let’s be honest: Not many of us in our forties or fifties would willingly accept advice from a combat-hardened, direct action-oriented twenty or thirty-something year old about how to better manage our organizations, our offices or our lives. We might consider accepting advice about hardware or software. But now factor in the fact the individual assigned to advise you knows nothing about your country’s (never mind local) politics or history and can’t speak your language. The benefit of his presence is what, exactly?

Clearly, the counter to this question is that effective partnering requires an effective partner. As [General Carter Ham recently put it](#), we should spend “time focusing on values, ethics and a military ethos that says when you put on the uniform of your country, then you accept the responsibility to defend and protect that nation, to abide by the legitimate civil authority.” But the notion that we can build these things in other countries by diving into the grassroots, building relationships and nurturing talent (in someone else’s backyard) understates the difficulties by at least an order of magnitude.

In some cases, for example, the oath uniformed personnel take is to protect the “government of the day.” Are we really going to urge them to go against their constitutions?

Or, to get really nitty-gritty about it, every young African NCO and junior officer I have spoken to over the past decade “gets” what we Westerners mean whenever we extol the virtues of professionalism. They understand what they might gain by belonging to an apolitical and incorruptible service. But they also all belong to families, and when they start families of their own, their principles begin to shift. This is inevitable, since to look after his dependents a man must look out for himself and his co-ethnics. Yes, the military *should* serve as the meritocratic counter to tribalism in countries still characterized by patrimonial social relationships. But when favoritism starts at the top, tribalism trickles down. (See Afghanistan or Iraq for non-African variations on this theme. Or replace tribalism with factionalism in other parts of the world.)

In other words, while security sector reform is the solution, it is not easy to achieve despite the relatively straight road leading to it. It has been more than sixty years since a man like Ramon Magsaysay rose to the Ministry of Defense in the Philippines.

Or to come at the problem from a slightly different angle: Washington can persist in thinking that some facsimile of a “neighborhood watch” program will work if applied globally. No doubt, in the face of an alien invasion, we Americans would find ourselves with all sorts of willing partners. But to assume that someone who lives down the street, whose son is a gang member, is going to help us smash his son’s gang is like hoping that the Pashtun would have divested themselves of the Taliban by now.

Indeed, perhaps we would be more capable of resisting the idea that partnering is the panacea for global

security if only we gave more serious and honest consideration to what hasn't worked in Afghanistan (poppy eradication, for instance), or what didn't work in Iraq (my students' eyes still pop when they recount how much money poured through their hands for "security assistance.") Or, if the White House's latest thinking on security assistance really does represent the future, let us at least appreciate what our erstwhile partners already know they will be able to get away with. They won't necessarily take the money and run. More likely they will just take the money and go absolutely nowhere.